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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

South Dakota tourism experts explore South American country

PAO Staff Report

RAPID CITY, S.D. – A two-day canoe trek through the dense rainforest of Suriname highlighted a week-long visit by Black Hills area tourism professionals to the South American country.

The group's intent was to get to gain a better understanding of that country's tourism industry and share their ideas on how to improve it.

"This truly is one of the last frontiers," said Jim Didier, Hotel Alex Johnson owner, as he discussed the many opportunities for South Dakota and Suriname to join efforts in cross-promoting tourism.

"I think the word for tourism in Suriname would be labeled eco-tourism," he said. "I looked around and felt like we were the only tourists. Everyone else was going about their business."

The trip, in early March, was coordinated through the South Dakota-Suriname State Partnership Program sponsored by the South Dakota National Guard. The partnership with Suriname focuses on advancing democratic institutions and its value systems. Economic development is a big part of this program that has tourism-related businesses leading the way.

The State Partnership Program is headed up by Lt. Col. Tracy Settle, a National Guard officer who believes that South Dakota can learn valuable lessons from tourism operators in Suriname just like our South American partners can learn from us.

"Engagement and building relationships is just a beginning in creating a mutually beneficial alliance for both countries," said Settle.

At the request of tourism officials in Paramaribo, the capitol city, the 10 tourism experts provided an informal critique of the Suriname tourism industry. It covered everything

from the quality of amenities in a primitive jungle lodge to the heart-stopping experience of zipping down a cable line at 25 mph while traversing through the treetops and over piranha-infested waters.

Along with Didier, the delegation included State Sen. Tom Katus; Carol Cameron, travel tour operator; Tracy Manning-Egge, Black Hills Harley-Davidson; Mike Derby, Canyon Lake Resort; Johnny Brockelsby and Jeff Oldham, Reptile Gardens; Bill Walsh, Rushmore Travel Agency; Papul Stabile, LEAD Fishing Tours and Michael Saba, Sanford Children's Clinics.

Bill Walsh recommended Suriname if one is looking for exotic places to travel.

"It's not for everyone," he added. "It's more for the adventure traveler."

Tourism was not the only focus as Sen. Katus, who was active in the Peace Corps in the 60's, accepted an invitation to speak at a lecture at the university campus in Paramaribo.

"The students were really interested in our electoral system," Katus said. "They wanted to know if I agreed with political election process as opposed to using the popular vote."

"I said, 'No,' and they asked, 'Why we don't change it?'" said Katus.

The group spent five action-packed days in the country touring UNESCO World Heritage sites, urban cultural and historical attractions, and a two-and-a-half-day expedition to Palumeu, an Amerindian village located deep in the heart of the Suriname rainforest.

They met with the Palumeu Village Chief and discussed medical support opportunities and then met with local craft producers whose only source of income came from sales of handicrafts to groups like this one.

Three of the travelers, Brockelsby, Walsh, and Oldham, seized the opportunity to venture into the deep, dark jungle at night in search of poisonous toads, multi-legged insects, and slithering reptiles.

For their courage, the group tabbed the three as "The Toad Busters."

Here are a few of the observations made by the delegation:

- Dr. Michael Saba – I got to interface with pediatric healthcare providers and experts, and met with Amerindian elders to investigate potential partnership opportunities.
- Jeff Oldham – Most of the reptiles down there are nocturnal but we got to see Brazilian River otters, piranhas, and some birds. I was really looking to make a connection to sell Suriname-made items in our gift shop.

- Tracy Manning-Egge – I’ve never been out of the country, I felt like a VIP. I saw many avenues for engagement between convention and visitors bureaus, chambers of commerce, and tourism related associations as they developed niche-marketing for specialized groups such as volunteer and medical oriented vacations and trips.
- Paul Stabile – I went with the idea to promote fishing – I probably should have gone to one of the resorts. I did find that the people living on the rivers depend on the fish as a food source – making management nearly impossible.
- Mike Derby, a businessman in the restaurant/motel industry, commented that this partnership clearly was a “perfect match” – one that clearly will benefit both partners in developing their tourism and hospitality based industries.

For more information on how to get involved with the South Dakota-Suriname SPP, call or E-mail Lt. Col. Tracy Settle at (605) 737-6771 or tracy.settle@us.army.mil.

Photo Cut Lines:



080310-A-0243S-001: The South Dakota Tourism Group meet with teachers and students from the Palumeu Village School on March 10 where they provided a donation that will be used to purchase a solar panel system for a TV and computer. (National Guard photo by Lt. Col. Tracy Settle) (RELEASED)

Link to Photo: <https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/080310-A-0243S-001.JPG>



080304-A-0243S-002: Dr. Michael Saba (left) speaks at a reception hosted by Ambassador Lisa Bobbie Schreiber-Hughes (right), U.S. ambassador to Suriname, for the South Dakota Tourism Group and Suriname tourism experts on March 4 at the ambassador's home. (National Guard photo by Lt. Col. Tracy Settle) (RELEASED)

Link to Photo: <https://sdguard.ngb.army.mil/released/080304-A-0243S-002.JPG>

FOR MEDIA OUTLETS: Lt. Col. Settle and several participants are available to take part in a panel/roundtable discussion on the SPP and the visit to Suriname.